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STAFF NOTES:

Middle East Africa South Asia

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MIDDLE EAST – AFRICA – SOUTH ASIA

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Kenya

Kenyatta Stages Military Show of Force

2 The military parade and jet flyby staged by President Kenyatta in Nairobi on March 21 was apparently intended to demonstrate that he continues to have the support of the armed forces and police. The show of force came at a time when Kenyatta is facing an unprecedented degree of popular hostility and grumbling in political and military circles.

2 The erosion of public respect and affection for Kenyatta has been hastened by widespread suspicion that he and his top associates from the southern branch of the Kikuyu tribe were implicated in the recent murder of J. M. Kariuki, an outspoken critic of the regime. The government has been able to maintain order in the aftermath of Kariuki's murder, but many military leaders are known to be unhappy with recent developments. Although military leaders apparently have no immediate plans to intervene, Kenyatta cannot be assured of military support, especially if he were to dismiss parliament, or take repressive measures against his critics.

1 The decline in Kenyatta's public standing was demonstrated most recently by the stony silence that greeted him when he waved to a crowd of several thousand civilians after the military parade on Friday. Speakers at the funeral of Kariuki on March 16 were openly critical of Kenyatta, and the press gave unprecedented coverage to these remarks, as well as to recent criticism of the president by members of parliament.

2 The president has gradually been losing prestige over the last two years in part because of the consequences of high unemployment, inflation, and rumors of high-level corruption and the accumulation of land and wealth by top officials, especially Kenyatta's wife. Matters have been made worse by the unwillingness of the octogenarian Kenyatta to delegate authority and his apparent inability to devote sustained attention to pressing government problems.

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Kenyatta's most immediate problem is how to deal with the parliamentary select committee looking into the government's handling of Kariuki's unsolved murder. Adroit backbenchers on the committee, in part reacting to the popular outcry triggered by Kariuki's murder, appear intent on pressing the investigation, even if it leads to persons close to Kenyatta. The president would probably like to thwart the select committee's inquiry by stage-managing its work or, if necessary, by dismissing parliament; he is probably deterred from closing the legislature because such an unpopular move might lead the armed forces to move against the government.

For the time being, the armed forces, like most civilian political factions in Kenya, appear willing to let the parliamentary inquiry proceed. Some strongly anti-Kenyatta officers have probably been dissuaded from conspiring against the government by the knowledge that agents of the security organizations permeate the armed forces. These anti-Kenyatta officers probably also have been deterred by concern that a bid for power might spur fighting among tribal factions within the army and the paramilitary police. (SECRET NO FOREIGN DISSEM/CONTROLLED DISSEM)

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